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R 211242Z DEC 09
FM AMEMBASSY NAIROBI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0217
INFO RUEHDJ/AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI
RUEHDR/AMEMBASSY DAR ES SALAAM 0013
RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA 0014
RUEHKM/AMEMBASSY KAMPALA
RUEHNR/AMEMBASSY NAIROBI
RUEHSA/AMEMBASSY PRETORIA 0003

UNCLAS NAIROBI 002646

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS
DEPT FOR AF/PPD WHARTON, KEMP, STRASSBERGER
IIP MURPHY, DOMOWITZ
AF/E DRIANO

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [OPRC](#) [KPAO](#) [KMDR](#) [KE](#)
SUBJECT: Kenya's Media: Part II - FM Radio Stations

REF: NAIROBI 2640

11. (U)Summary. This is the second part of a four-part report on the state of the Kenyan Media. The parts are: 1) Overview and the new media law; 2) Radio Stations; 3) Media Houses and Cross Ownership; and 4) Role of the media and New Trends. The 90s liberalization of the broadcast industry combined with radio's innate advantage over other media have caused the number of FM stations in Kenya to multiply. The major contributing factor was the explosive growth of vernacular, tribe-concentrated stations. The vernacular stations played a questionable role in the 2007 post-election violence. Many fear that small but popular radio stations will be gradually absorbed by a handful of powerful media houses or rich politicians. The new media law is making an attempt to streamline licensing and clarify the distribution of frequencies. End summary.

Had to be Radio

12. (U) Radio remains the most pervasive and affordable medium in Kenya, especially in its rural areas. Although the media sector has exploded in the last fifteen years, television sets are generally owned only by the country's relatively small urban middle class. More than any other medium, radio speaks Kenya's local languages, and showcases local culture and way of life. Low production and distribution costs make it possible for radio to flexibly interpret the world from local perspectives, and to respond to local needs for information. A 2008 Gallup survey indicated that 94 percent of Kenyan households owned a radio while only 30 percent owned a television set. The same survey showed that only eleven percent of Kenyans read newspapers on a daily basis, while 81 percent reported that they received information daily via radio.

Multiplying at Breakneck Speed

13. (U) The first private FM station, Capital FM, began

broadcasting in 1996. Soon, many stations sprang up in both rural and urban areas. The Royal Media, one of the most powerful media houses in Kenya, perfected the art of rural outreach, with more than 20 stations throughout the country focusing on local news. Later, stations such as Kameme and KASS mushroomed after it was noticed that Kenyans, especially in the slums and rural areas, preferred broadcasts in their tribal languages. Initially, they were available only via the state-run Kenya Broadcasting Company (KBC), which broadcast for two hours a week in 17 different languages. Following the lead of Nairobi's "Kameme," the number of vernacular stations exploded. Now, virtually, all tribes in Kenya have FM stations broadcasting in their own language.

14. (U) There are five different types of FM radio stations in Kenya: mainstream, vernacular, religious, community and foreign. Radio listenership tends to be regional, and those mainstream stations which broadcast in more than one region and in either English or Kiswahili account for 40 percent of the existing stations. Vernacular stations account for almost 25 percent. Community stations operate on community sponsorship and are barred from commercial advertising. Currently there are seven community stations in Nairobi. Pamoja FM, which operates in the Kibera slum is representative: it is underfunded, its journalists are unpaid, and it reaches about one million listeners. Religious stations attempt to propagate certain religions as Hope and Baraka (Protestant), Waumini (Catholic); Iqra, Rahma, Salaam, and Star (Muslim). Foreign stations include BBC, VOA, Radio France International and a Chinese station. The BBC started a 24-hour service in Nairobi in 1998 and has since expanded to Kisumu and Mombasa. The VOA began transmission with a 24-hour relayed signal in June 2001.

Vernacular Stations: Mixed Blessing

15. (U) The explosion of FM radio stations can largely be attributed to the proliferation of vernacular stations. According to the Media Council of Kenya, Kenyans tend to tune into English or Kiswahili stations for entertainment but to vernacular stations for issue-based information. Particularly in rural areas, information on agriculture --planting, seed selection, rainfall, fertilizer and the produce markets is passed by vernacular stations. One of Kenya's most dominant tribes, the Kikuyu, is served by five stations - three nationwide and two regional. To list only a few from the kaleidoscope of ethnic stations, there are stations such as Inooro (Kikuyu), KASS (Kalenjin), Geza (Kisii), Karamugi (Luo), Mushi (Kamba) and Mlenbe (Luya).

16. (SBU) Proponents of vernacular stations, such as Rose Kimotho of Kameme and C.K. Joshua of KASS, argue that it is not the medium, the language, but the content that is crucial and stations use vernacular languages only because many feel much more comfortable with their own mother tongue. They maintain that any language could incite violence and that language alone cannot be blamed for tribal violence. Many Kenyans enjoy their identity as a member of a certain tribe and prefer the ease of receiving information in their own language rather than having to digest the same information in English or Kiswahili. Vernacular radio is an efficient way to bring a broad cross section of the population into the decision making process. It also plays an important role in educating the mass in the rural area where the government failed to do so. Wachira Waruru, Managing Director of Citizen Group, which runs several vernacular stations, said that denying Kenya such a tool would mean depriving the majority of Kenyans of information. Some even insist that terming vernacular stations "bad," stems from a colonial mentality where all languages other than English were

discouraged.

17. (SBU) Opponents of vernacular stations, such as Michael Mumo of Capital FM and Peter Kimani of the Standard Daily, think that they, by nature, exclude members of other tribes and create a sense of division among Kenyans. The majority of Kenyan journalists agree that the media, particularly vernacular FM stations, played a questionable role during the 2007 post-election violence. Vernacular stations became the tool for certain political forces and provided a platform in pushing their agenda. Empowered with metaphors that only their tribes could understand, the vernacular stations pitted one tribe against another in many instances. Some presenters of vernacular FM stations could mobilize their tribesmen effectively along a political agenda. Joshua Sang of KASS FM, enormously popular in the Kalenjin region, is a good example. In November 2009, two Kenyan journalists filed complaints against Sang and KASS FM to the Media Council for exposing them to public debate "in a manner that was likely to cause them harm from listeners." Sang allegedly castigated two journalists on air for writing unfavorable stories about the recently formed Kalenjin Council of Elders and threatened them that he would burn their fingers if the story was covered in a negative light. Cases like this will continue to feed suspicions about vernacular station for "fanning ethnic animosity" and creating a dangerous environment in the run-up to the 2012 presidential elections.

18. (SBU) A few media experts maintain that vernacular stations are a temporary fad, which will phase out as Kenya undergoes more urbanization. Sheila Amdany, former owner of Simba FM and current Secretary of the Media Owners' Association thinks that vernacular

stations are a "fashionable thing for the time being to be faded out in time."

19. (SBU) According to the Media Council of Kenya, the problem lies in the lack of capacity in the Kenyan government to monitor what is being broadcast. According to Wachira Waruru, Chairman of the Media Council, although vernacular stations have been accused of inciting post-election violence, there is no well-documented evidence. Even the Waki and Kriegler reports - comprehensive reports on the post-election violence -- do not include any concrete examples of radio broadcasts linked to specific violations.

For Some, Vernacular Speaks Money

10. (SBU) Radio Africa owns 44 frequencies with six FM stations in operation currently while Royal Media is running 22 FM stations in Kenya, most of which are vernacular stations. Popular Classic FM, KISS FM, East FM, Jambo FM, X FM, and Smooth FM all belong to Radio Africa. The Chairman of Royal Media, S.K. Macharia, of the Kikuyu tribe, was the first media owner to rapidly expand into vernacular stations. As noted in reftel, recent changes to the Kenya media law and regulations try to curb the unchecked appetite for more frequencies by a few owners by stipulating one frequency per broadcaster in the same area. Powerful media houses such as Royal Media have vowed not to surrender the frequencies already in their possession, even those frequencies that are not being utilized and kept idle. In fact, Royal Media says it plans to open more vernacular stations in the near future.

11. (U) The Ambassador regularly does live call-in interviews on

the radio, including vernacular stations.
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